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Dr. Joan Halifax Ph. D. Lecture at Keio University

Wise Hope on Compassion, Leadership, and Resilience

A good part of my life has been spent relating to situations that might be deemed hopeless—as an anti-war activist and civil rights worker in the nineteen sixties and as a caregiver of dying people and trainer of clinicians in conventional medical centers for fifty years.

I also worked as a volunteer with death row inmates for six years, continue to serve in medical clinics in remote areas of the Himalayas, and worked in Kathmandu with Rohingya refugees who have no status, anywhere.

You might ask, why work in such hopeless situations?

Why care about ending the direct and structural violence of war or injustice, as violence is a constant in our world? Why have hope for people who are dying, when death is inevitable; why work with those who are on death row... redemption is unlikely; or serve refugees fleeing from genocide, and no country seems to want these men, women, and children

I have often been troubled by the notion of hope. It just did not seem very Buddhist to hope.

The Zen master Suzuki Roshi once said that life is “like stepping onto a boat which is about to sail out to sea and sink.” That certainly brings conventional hope up short!

We know that ordinary hope is based in desire, wanting an outcome that could well be different from what might actually happen. To make matters worse, not getting what we hoped for is often experienced as a misfortune. If we look deeply, we realize that anyone who is conventionally hopeful has an expectation that always hovers in the background, the shadow of fear that one's wishes will not be fulfilled.

Ordinary hope then is a form of suffering and a partner with fear.

We might ask then: what more specifically is hope? Let's begin by saying what hope is not: hope is not the belief that everything will turn out well. People die. Populations die out. Civilizations die. Planets die. Stars die.

Optimists imagine that everything will turn out positively. I consider this point of view dangerous; being an optimist means one doesn't have to bother; one doesn't have to act. Also, if things don't turn out well, cynicism or futility often follow.

Hope of course is also opposed to the narrative that everything is getting worse, the position that pessimists take. Pessimists take refuge in depressive apathy or apathy driven by cynicism. And, as we might expect, both optimists and pessimists are excused from engagement.

So, what is it to be hopeful and not optimistic? The American novelist Barbara Kingsolver explains it this way:

“I have been thinking a lot lately about the difference between being optimistic and being hopeful. I would say that I’m a hopeful person, although not necessarily optimistic.

Here’s how I would describe it. The pessimist would say, ‘It’s going to be a terrible winter; we’re all going to die.’ The optimist would say, ‘Oh, it’ll be all right; I don’t think it’ll be that bad. The hopeful person would say, ‘Maybe someone will still be alive in February, so I’m going to put some potatoes in the root cellar just in case.’

Hope is …a mode of resistance…. a gift I can try to cultivate.”

We discover that wise hope is born of radical uncertainty, rooted in the unknown and the unknowable. How could we ever know what is really going to happen?!

My good friend, the cultural historian William DeBuys, once remarked to me that he placed his faith, such as it is, in surprise.

Wise hope requires that we open ourselves to what we do not know, what we cannot know; that we open ourselves to being surprised, perpetually surprised.

In fact, wise hope comes alive through the premise that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of radical uncertainty, of surprise, is also the space in which we can engage. This is what socially engaged Buddhist Joanna Macy calls “active hope,” the engaged expression of wise hope.

It’s when we discern courageously and deeply, and at the same time realize we don’t know what will happen that wise hope comes alive; in the midst of improbability, impermanence, and possibility is the where the imperative to act rises up. Wise hope is not seeing things unrealistically but rather seeing things as they are, including the truth of impermanence… as well as the truth of suffering—both its existence and the possibility of its transformation, for better or for worse.

Yet often we become paralyzed by the belief that there is nothing to hope for—that our patient’s cancer diagnosis is a one-way street with no exit, that our political situation is beyond repair, that there is no way out of our climate crisis.

In response to the notion of hope and hopelessness, the Theravadan monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu reminds us that we are not victims of fate or of a higher power; from this perspective, we can say that hope opens us to a wider horizon and to deeper and unexpected possibilities.

I often say that there should be just two words over the door of our Zen temple in Santa Fe: Show up!

One might ask why would I want these words over the door of our temple, when despair, defeatism, cynicism, skepticism, and the apathy of forgetting are fed by the corroding effect of conventional hopelessness.

There are 67.3 million refugees in the world today; only eleven countries are free from conflict; climate change is turning forests into deserts. Japan's population is declining. Suicide is increasing among children. Many feel no connection to religion or spirituality, and countless people are deeply alienated and take refuge in their digital devices.

The peacemaker Daniel Berrigan once remarked

"One cannot level one's moral lance at every evil in the universe. There are just too many of them. But you can do something; and the difference between doing something and doing nothing is everything."

Berrigan understood that wise hope doesn't mean denying the realities that we are confronted with today.

It means facing them, addressing them, and remembering what else is present, like the shifts in our values that recognize and move us to address suffering right now.

Maybe you know the story told by the great natural scientist Loren Eiseley of the man who is walking down the beach and sees another man tossing starfish back into the sea.

The first man says to the second man: Why bother, too many starfish; won't make any difference.

One version of the story has the second man saying, "Well, it helped that one," as he tosses another starfish back into the ocean.

There is a powerful tool that we can use to actualize wise and active hope, when standing at the edge.

Dogen translator and social activist Sensei Kazuaki Tanahashi developed a teaching called the “Four Commonplace Truths.” They are a formula for wise and active hope. According to Kaz, we need to realize that:

1. No situation is impossible to change.
2. A communal vision, outstanding strategy, and sustained effort can bring forth positive changes.
3. Everyone can help make a difference.
4. No one is free of responsibility.

I also recall the words of Fyodor Dostoyevsky who said, “To live without hope is to cease to live.” His words remind us that apathy is not an enlightened path.

We are called to live with possibility and responsibility, engaged and not apathetic, knowing that uncertainty and impermanence prevail no matter what happens, and yet, as Kaz has reminded us: everyone can make a difference and no one is free of responsibility.

Sitting with a dying person or a dying planet, we show up, we do the best we can, we rely on altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, engagement, and most importantly compassion and wise hope, even though these powerful human virtues can be challenged. Without these virtues, we cease to really live.

Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in November, 1943, said:

“Ultimately, we have one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.”

The American historian and social activist Howard Zinn wrote in his autobiography that:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.”

“And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

We can ask ourselves then: why not show up, why not show up now! Why not plunge the fire tongs deep into the cold, gray ashes! I believe that is what Dr. Zinn calls a victory, that hope is a marvelous victory, a victory over futility, a victory over fear.